

In 3 Key States That Elected Trump, Bitter Divisions on Reopening

With Democratic governors and Republican legislatures, ending stay-at-home orders mixes health guidance and partisan politics.



The Wisconsin Supreme Court on Wednesday sided with the Republican majority in the Legislature, ending a statewide stay-at-home order by Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat. Credit: Lauren Justice for The New York Times

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WAUKESHA, Wis. — In Wisconsin, residents woke up to a state of confusion on Thursday after the conservative majority on the State Supreme Court sided with the Republican majority in the Legislature on Wednesday night, [overturning a statewide stay-at-home order](#) by Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat.

In Michigan, hundreds of protesters, many of them armed, turned out at the State Capitol in a drenching rainstorm. The state closed the building in advance and canceled the legislative session, rather than risk a repeat of an April protest in which [angry protesters carrying long guns crowded inside](#).

In Pennsylvania, some Republican lawmakers urged defiance of the Democratic governor's orders to keep nonessential businesses closed, and President Trump flew to Allentown for a politically charged visit to a medical supply facility.

The response to the coronavirus in those three states, which determined the 2016 presidential election and could strongly influence the one in November, is becoming a confused and agitated blend of health guidance, protest and partisan politics — leaving residents to fend for themselves.

“My anxiety for this pandemic is not having a unified plan, that we’re all on the same page, and listening to science and the same rules,” said Jamie O’Brien, 40, who owns a hair salon in Madison, Wis., that remains closed because of a local stay-at-home order.

Across Wisconsin, the court ruling left some residents in a festive mood, heading directly to one of the state’s many taverns to celebrate. Others were determined to stay home, worried that it was too soon to return to crowded restaurants and shops.

“You have the one group that’s like, ‘Yay!’” said Patty Schachtner, a Democratic state senator from western Wisconsin. “And the other group is like, ‘Man, life just got complicated.’”

It was an unsettling microcosm of a country increasingly unable to separate bitter political divisions from plans to battle a deadly disease. Democratic governors in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, backed by public health experts, have urged caution before [reopening](#). Republican legislatures in the states have pushed in the opposite direction, citing economic necessity and personal freedom.



Protesters in Lansing, Mich., gathered at the State Capitol on Thursday to speak out against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s stay-at-home order. Credit: Brittany Greeson for The New York Times

The conflict between those goals was apparent in Wisconsin on Thursday, after the State Supreme Court, in effect, freed residents to return to pre-coronavirus life. Mr. Evers had issued an order in late March instructing bars, hair salons and other nonessential businesses to close, but the court rejected an order that extended restrictions until May 26.

In an interview, Mr. Evers expressed frustration and deep concern about the safety of Wisconsin residents in the days ahead.

“We are in a new chaotic time,” he said.

Asked what residents of the state should now do, Mr. Evers said, “My advice is this: Be safer at home. Keep on doing what you have been doing.”

More than 11,000 coronavirus cases have been identified in Wisconsin as of Thursday night, [a New York Times database shows](#), and at least 434 people have died.

[A Marquette Law School poll](#) released on Tuesday found that 69 percent of respondents believed it was appropriate to restrict public gatherings and close schools and businesses. Its poll in late March found that 86 percent were in favor of restrictions.

Ann Hall, who owns a beloved bistro in New Richmond, Wis., with her husband, could have been celebrating a day after the court freed her to reopen her dining room to customers.

Instead, she is debating when it will be safe enough to do so. Since Mr. Evers closed nonessential businesses, she has been offering carryout and operating on a truncated schedule, with a smaller staff. Until there is a vaccine for the coronavirus, Ms. Hall might keep the doors to her 65-seat dining room closed.

“Everybody keeps saying they want the freedom to decide to go out,” she said. “Well, I have the freedom to decide that I don’t want to open my restaurant.”

The six largest cities in Wisconsin remain under stay-at-home orders. After the ruling on Wednesday, local health officers and mayors issued their own directives, many keeping bars and other businesses closed, and banning large gatherings.

“We want to let the people of Dane County know that, as far as the guidelines, when you wake up tomorrow it’s going to be the same as when you woke up this morning,” Joe Parisi, the county executive, [said on Wednesday night](#) at a news conference in Madison, the state’s capital.

Wisconsin has been showing signs of improvement over the past week, including in the Green Bay area, which had three meatpacking outbreaks and the state’s highest per-capita case numbers.



Gotham Bagels offers curbside pickup at its location in Madison, Wis., but will not let customers inside until health experts recommend doing so. Credit: Lauren Justice for The New York Times



Mark Rudd said he was not planning on reopening Mr. Rudd's Barbershop in Sun Prairie, Wis., until the state's stay-at-home order was supposed to end. Credit: Lauren Justice for The New York Times

Michigan, which had perhaps the country's most alarming spike in cases outside of New York, has seen steady improvement for more than a month. The state had [about 50,000 known cases and about 4,800 deaths](#) as of Thursday night. Michigan officials have been reporting about 400 new cases each day, down from more than 1,700 on some days in early April.

On Thursday, protesters gathered in Lansing to demand that Ms. Whitmer reopen the state. Members of the crowd talked of conspiracy theories about the origin and the treatment of the coronavirus, and decried the development of vaccines to treat it.

But even that crowd showed the state's divisions. Some protesters were armed with Glock handguns and AR-15 semiautomatic rifles, while one counterprotester wore a black "Nerf Militia" T-shirt and waved a Nerf gun while railing against Mr. Trump and Jared Kushner, his son-in-law and senior adviser.

"If America gets back on its feet, I think it will all turn out all right," said Denny McDowell, 75, who said he was concerned about losing civil liberties. "But the Democrats are going to want to lock down the state as long as they can and that could hurt."

In Pennsylvania, reports of new cases have largely followed the national curve, with an extended downward-slanted plateau. [More than 63,000 cases](#) had been identified there as of Thursday night, along with about 4,300 deaths. The state's drop in new case reports has accelerated in recent days, though concerning rates of growth continue in some rural counties.

The confrontation over the state's coronavirus response became particularly charged over the past week, as an array of lawmakers and local officials pledged to defy the stay-at-home orders issued by Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat. Republican lawmakers [pushed local officials statewide](#) to commit to disobeying the governor's "arbitrary and capricious decisions," as officials in a growing number of counties had indicated over the past weekend that they were likely to take such actions.

But at a news conference on Monday, the governor condemned officials pledging defiance as “engaging in behavior that is both selfish and unsafe” and warned of an array of penalties, including the loss of licenses to businesses that break the law and the withdrawal of certain funding to county governments.

Many of the counties soon backed down, leaving Republican lawmakers to push bills that would achieve the same thing, exempting businesses from state stay-at-home orders and moving powers to the counties from the governor. Those aimed most squarely at taking away gubernatorial powers are almost certain to be vetoed. But the partisan lines on reopening have been thickly drawn.

“It has clearly hampered the response effort,” said Gary Eichelberger, a Republican and the chairman of the Cumberland County commission near Harrisburg. He said much of the opposition to the shutdown was now suffused with politics.

“They’re all up for re-election; we’re very conscious of that,” Mr. Eichelberger said of the lawmakers. He had been in discussions with the governor’s office about the reopening timeline but saw little to gain in a confrontational approach. When his colleagues on the commission, which has a Republican majority, pointed out publicly that they did not have the power to unilaterally defy the governor, they were met with a flood of hate mail, which to Mr. Eichelberger clearly seemed to have been part of an organized campaign.

“Are these folks interested in scoring cheap political points and telling people what they want to hear,” he asked, “or are they focused on finding a real solution?”



Demos Sacarellos, a restaurant owner in York County, Pa., spoke with a police officer on Sunday after complaints about his restaurant opening for sit-down service. Credit: Paul Kuehnel/York Daily Record, via Associated Press

Politics aside, many people realized they were largely on their own. Along Bluemound Road in Brookfield, Wis., few stores or restaurants had opened to customers, except for takeout, as of Thursday afternoon.

At Picardy Shoe Parlour, which sells women's shoes and clothing, doors were open for the first time in weeks. The store owner, Russell Levin, wore a mask while waiting for business, but said he would not insist that customers do so. A nearby table held boxes of complimentary disposable masks and gloves.

"I've been in business for 35 years, and I've never seen anything like this," he said of the economic disruption. Because his customers tend to be over 40, Mr. Levin will now set aside every Monday as "appointment only," for customers who do not feel safe in a crowd.

Mr. Levin, who said he was not politically active and considered himself an independent, said he did not think Mr. Evers was acting politically. "He has to protect the state," he said. As for himself, he will not be going out to dine or for drinks until the pandemic eases further. He said he would try to support those businesses in other ways.

***Kay Nolan** reported from Waukesha, Wis., Julie Bosman from Chicago, and Campbell Robertson from Pittsburgh. Emily Shetler contributed reporting from Madison, Wis., Kathy Gray from Lansing, Mich., and Mitch Smith from Overland Park, Kan. Alain Delaqu erie contributed research.*

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